

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7313
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
UNINT BAGHDAD 761
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1597

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, IS, SY, PLO
SUBJ: SYRIA MOVES SIDEWAYS

1. SUMMARY: THE VAGUE WORDING OF THE COMMUNIQUE ISSUED
AT THE END OF THE CONFERENCE OF FOREIGN AND DEFENSE MINISTERS
OF THE ARAB "STEADFASTNESS FRONT" REINFORCES THE IMPRESSION
THAT SYRIA REMAINS DETERMINED TO AVOID AN ARMED CONFRONTATION
WITH ISRAEL IF AT ALL POSSIBLE. THE COMMUNIQUE MAKES
NO SPECIFIC PLEDGES OF SUPPORT TO THE PLO AND AVOIDS ANY
REFERENCE TO THE UNSC RESOLUTION. SYRIA CONTINUES TO
FOLLOW THE MODERATE LINE KHADDAM TOOK WITH ME DURING OUR
MARCH 18 DISCUSSION. STATEMENTS OF SEVERAL WELL-INFORMED
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BAAHT PARTY MEMBERS DEMONSTRATE THAT THE PARTY IS BEING
EDUCATED TO THE NEED TO AVOID AN ARMED CLASH WITH ISRAEL.
WHILE SYRIAN EDITORIALS ARE SOMEWHAT MORE STRIDENT IN TONE,
EVEN THEY WARN AGAINST SYRIA'S BEING DRAWN INTO A WAR AT
THIS TIME. DESPITE THIS, THE ENTRY OF IRAQIS INTO LEBANON
UNDERScores THE DANGERS INHERENT IN THE PRESENT SITUATION.
SYRIA WILL BE HARD PUT TO AVOID GRADUALLY ENLARGING ITS

SUPPORTING ROLE AGAINST ISRAEL'S INVADING FORCES IN THE
ABSENCE OF ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL. END SUMMARY.

2. ALL SIGNS CONTINUE TO INDICATE THAT SYRIA WISHED TO
AVOID, IF AT ALL POSSIBLE, DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN THE
FIGHTING IN SOUTH LEBANON. HAVING CAST ITSELF AS THE LEADER
OF THE ARAB STRUGGLE AGAINST ISRAEL, HOWEVER, THE ASSAD
REGIME HAS BEEN FORCED TO GIVE THE APPEARANCE OF MOVEMENT WHILE
REMAINING RELATIVELY INERT.

3. WHILE WE HAVE NO INFORMATION ON THE JUST CONCLUDED
CONFERENCE OF FOREIGN AND DEFENSE MINISTERS OF THE ARAB
"STEADFASTNESS FRONT" BEYOND THE OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE AND
KHADDAM'S RESPONSES TO JOURNALISTS AT THE END OF THE SESSIONS,
IT APPEARS THAT SYRIA HAS AGAIN AVOIDED BEING MANEUVERED INTO
ACTION WHICH IT CONSIDERS CONTRARY TO ITS INTERESTS. THE
COMMUNIQUE IS PAP AND RATHER WEAK PAP AT THAT. IT PREDICTABLY
DENOUNCES ISRAEL'S AGGRESSION AND ITS "TERRORISM AGAINST THE
PALESTINIAN ARAB PEOPLE" AND CALLS FOR ISRAEL'S IMMEDIATE AND
UNCONDITIONAL WITHDRAWAL. IT FURTHER UNDERLINES THE NEED FOR
SOLIDARITY WITH THE LEBANESE PEOPLE AND STRESSES "RESPECT FOR
LEBANON'S SOVEREIGNTY, INDEPENDENCE, UNITY OF ITS PEOPLE

AND THE INVIOABILITY OF ITS NATIONAL SOIL..." WHILE ENDORSING
THE RIGHT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITIES TO EXERCISE THEIR
NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES.
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4. TURNING TO THE PALESTINIANS, THE COMMUNIQUE CALLS FOR
"COUNTERING AMERICAN AND ZIONIST PLOTS DESIGNED TO LIQUIDATE
THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE" AND CALLS FOR ASSISTING THE PALE-
STINIAN RESISTANCE IN ALL AREAS--PARTICULARLY POLITICAL AND
MILITARY IN ORDER TO PROVIDE THE NECESSARY POTENTIALS FOR THE
PALESTINIAN PEOPLE UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PLO IT
REJECTS THE CONVENING OF ANY ARAB SUMMIT IN WHICH SADAT WOULD
PARTICIPATE AND DENOUNCES "HIS ROLE AND ATTITUDE TOWARD
ZIONIST AGGRESSION IN SOUTH LEBANON". FINALLY, THE COMMUNIQUE
CALLS FOR SUPPORTING THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE IN THE OCCUPIED
TERRITORIES.

5. THE COMMUNIQUE IS MORE NOTABLE FOR WHAT IT DOES NOT SAY.
IT MAKES NO SPECIFIC PLEDGES OF SUPPORT TO THE PLO AND AVOIDS
ANY REFERENCES TO THE UNSC RESOLUTION. KHADDAM'S STATEMENTS
TO THE PRESS AFTER THE CLOSE OF THE CONFERENCE WERE PURPOSEFULLY
VAGUE. WHEN ASKED ABOUT SYRIA'S OPENING OF ITS TERRITORIES
TO ARAB FORCES WHICH WANT TO JOIN THE FRONT (PRESUMABLY "
STEADFASTNESS FRONT") AND WHETHER IT COULD BE CONSTRUED FROM THIS
THAT IRAQI TROOPS COULD PARTICIPATE, KHADDAM REPLIED: "THE SYRIAN
STAND IS CLEAR AND FRANK, AND WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS TO EXERT

EFFORTS TO SECURE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL." HE ALSO NOTED IN THIS REGARD THAT THE ARRIVAL OF ARAB FORCES IN LEBANON WAS FIRSTLY THE CONCERN OF THE LEGITIMATE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES. KHADDAM WAS LESS ADAMANT THAN THE COMMUNIQUE ABOUT REJECTING THE CONVENING OF A SUMMIT CONFERENCE WITH SADAT PRESENT. FOLLOWING ASSAD'S NEW SOFTER LINE TOWARDS SADAT, HE SAID THAT "ANY ARAB MEETING UNDER THE POLICY OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE EGYPTIAN REGIME DOES NOT SERVE JOINT ARAB ACTION." (THUS, BACKPEDALING FROM HIS PREVIOUS ASSERTIONS THAT SYRIA COULD NEVER AGAIN DEAL WITH SADAT PERSONALLY.) AT NO TIME DID KHADDAM MAKE ANY SPECIFIC COMMITMENTS OR THREATS TO COUNTER THE ISRAELI THRUST INTO LEBANON.

6. THUS, THE MODERATE LINE KHADDAM TOOK WITH ME DURING OUR
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MARCH 18 DISCUSSION ON STATIONING UN TROOPS IN LEBANON SEEMS INTACT ALTHOUGH PRESSURES ARE UNBOUBTEDLY MOUNTING ON SYRIA TO DO MORE, AS EVIDENCED BY SYRIA'S INITIALLY RELUCTANT ACQUIESCENCE TO IRAQI TROOPS AND MATERIAL TRANSITING SYRIA. (TIALIAN COUNSELOR TOLD BY HIS PRC COUNTJRPART THAT 400 IRAQI TROOPS WERE IN THE FIRST CONTINGENT.) HOWEVER, KHADAAM' EMPHASIS ON THE NEED TO SECURE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL UNDERSCORES SYRIA'S SUPPORT FOR THE PROMPT STATIONING OF UN TROOPS IN THE REGION.

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R 221212Z MAR 78
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TO SECSTATE IMMEDIATE 7314
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
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AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
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7. OTHER REPORTS ALSO INDICATE SYRIA'S DETERMINATION TO AVOID A CLASH WITH THE ISRAELIS IF POSSIBLE. DATT HAS RECEIVED REPORT THAT FAWAZ SAYYAGH, THE MEMBER OF THE BP NATIONAL COMMAND CONCERNED WITH FOREIGN AFFAIRS, IN LAST FEW DAYS LECTURED A PROMINENT GROUP OF PARTY MEMBERS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SYRIA'S AVOIDING A WAR WITH ISRAEL NOT OF ITS TIME AND CHOOSING. A BAATH PARTY MEMBER WHO TEACHES INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AT THE PARTY. HIGHER INSTITUTE FOR POLITICAL STUDIES TOLD POLOFF ATHT SYRIA VIEWED THE PALESTINIAN ATTACK ON ISRAELI CIVILIANS AS BEING AS MUCH DIRECTED AGAINST SYRIAN AS EGYPTIAN INTERESTS. HE ASSERTED THAT SADAT'S INITIATIVE WOULD HAVE COLLAPSED OF ITS OWN WEIGHT AFTER BEGIN'S VISIT TO THE US, AND THE RAID ONLY
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CLOUDED THE PICTURE. HE SAID SYRIA WOULD REDOUBLE EFFORTS TO GAIN CONTROL OF THE PLO AND UNDERMINE ARAFAT'S LEADERSHIP WITHIN FATAH (CITED COL. SA'AD SAYYIL AS AN ARAFAT LOYALIST WHO WAS GROWING DISENCHANTED WITH HIS LEADERSHIP.) SYRIAN TROOPS, HE ASSERTED, WOULD NOT GET DIRECTLY INVOLVED UNLESS FIRED UPON DESPITE THE STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE OCCUPATION OF SOUTH LEBANON WOULD GIVE ISRAELI IN RELATION TO SYRIA. HE ADDED, HOWEVER, THAT SYRIA COULD NOT STAND IDLE FOR TOO LONG IF WITHDRAWAL DID NOT OCCUR.

8. EDITORIALS IN THE SYRIAN PRESS, IN CONTRAST TO PRIVATE STATEMENTS BY INFORMED SYRIANS, ARE HIGHLY SUPPORTIVE OF THE PLOZM YET, EVEN THESE COLUMNS NOTE THE TIME IS NOT PRO- PITIOUS FOR A WAR WITH ISRAEL. AL-BAATH EDITORIAL OF MARCH 21 IS CRITICAL OF "REGIMES (IRAQ) ENGAGED IN A GAME OF OVER- BIDDING WHICH IS PUSHING OTHERS (SYRIA/PLO) TO A RESULT WHICH IS ALREADY KNOWN (DEFEAT) IN VIEW OF THE GENERAL ARAB SITUATION." WHILE SYRIAN OFFICIALS THUS FAR SEEM GENERALLY SATISFIED WITH US ACTIONS, THE PRESS HAS ACCUSED US OF GIVING AN AMERICAN BLESSING TO ISRAEL'S INVASION.

9. ASSAD'S MARCH 18 SPEECH AT THE DEDICATION OF THE TABQA DAM IS THE CLEAREST PUBLIC SIGNAL AVAILABLE REGARDING SYRIAN INTENTIONS. WHILE ANNOUNCING THE OPENING OF SYRIA'S BORDERS

TO ANY ARAB WISHING TO AID THE RESISTANCE, HE ASSERTED THAT
".JUST AS THERE IS NO ROOM FOR IRRESPONSIBL TALK THERE IS NO
ROOM AMONG US FOR DEFEATISM. SINCE THE PLAN (ISRAELI) COULD
NOT DRAG US INTO POSITIONS OF RECKLESSNESS AND ADVENTURE,
NEIGHER CAN THEY DRAG US INTO POSITIONS OF FEAR AND SUB-
MISSION.

10. DESPITE ALL OF THIS, THE ENTRY OF IRAQIS INTO LEBANON
UNDERSCORES (IF ANY UNDERSCORING IS NEEDED) THE DANGERS
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INHERENT IN THE PRESENT SITUATION TO ENVELOP THE AREA IN
A WAR WHICH IS WANTED BY AND WOULD ONLY BENEFIT THE EXTREMISTS
IN BOTH CAMPS. SYRIA HAS ALLOWED SAIQA TO ENTER THE FRAY.
IT HAS PLEDGED TO PROVIDE AIR DEFENSE FOR THE ADF FORCES IN
LEBANON AND MAY HAVE TRANSFERRED SOME PLANES THERE. IT HAS
NOW TAKEN THE FURTHER RISK OF OPENING ITS BORDERS TO TWO
CONVOYS OF IRAQI MEN AND MATERIAL DESTINED FOR THE FRAY.
WITH EGYPTIAN AND IRAQI MEDIA EXPLOITING SYRIA'S DISCOMFITURE
AND FRINEDS, SUCH AS LIBYA, UNDOUBTDLY URGING GREATER SUPPORT
FOR FEDAYEEN GROUPS, SYRIA WILL BE HARD PUT TO AVOID ENLARGING
ITS SUPPORTING ROLE IF THE CEASEFIRE DOES NOT HOLD AND ISRAEL
WITHDRAWAL IS DELAYED.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

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Status: NATIVE
Subject: SYRIA MOVES SIDEWAYS
TAGS: PEPR, IS, SY, PLO
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Type: TE
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